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## What are noroviruses?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause gastrointestinal illness in people. Several other names have been used for noroviruses, including:

- Norwalk-like viruses (NLVs),
- Caliciviruses (because they belong to the virus family *Caliciviridae*), and
- Small round structured viruses (SRSV).

Viruses are very different from bacteria and parasites, some of which can cause illnesses similar to norovirus infection. Viruses are much smaller, ***not affected by treatment with antibiotics***, and cannot grow outside of a person's body. Noroviruses are not associated with influenza, which is a respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus.

## What are the symptoms of illness caused by noroviruses?

The symptoms of norovirus illness usually include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping. Sometimes, people have low-grade fever, chills, headaches, muscle aches, and a general sense of tiredness. The illness often begins suddenly, with the infected person feeling very sick. The illness is usually brief, with symptoms lasting only one to two days.

## How serious is norovirus illness?

Norovirus infection does not usually cause serious illness, although people may feel very ill and vomit many times a day. Most people will feel well within one to two days and have no long-term health effects related to their illness. However, sometimes people are unable to drink enough liquids to replace what is lost because of vomiting and diarrhea. These people can become dehydrated and may need special medical attention. Dehydration is more commonly seen among the very young, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems. There is no evidence to suggest that an infected person can become a long-term carrier of norovirus.

## How do people become infected with noroviruses?

Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected with the virus in several ways, including:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus;
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus and placing their hands in their mouth; and
- Having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms.

Persons working in childcare centers or nursing facilities should pay special attention to clients who have gastrointestinal symptoms. Strict adherence to infection control practices is highly recommended because norovirus is very contagious.

### **When do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin within 24 to 48 hours after ingestion of the virus, but they can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure.

### **Are noroviruses contagious?**

Noroviruses are very contagious and can spread easily from person to person. Both stool and vomit are infectious.

### **How long are people contagious?**

People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to several days after recovery. The peak period of contagiousness lasts for 48 hours after the last vomiting to diarrheal episode. Therefore, it is particularly important for people to emphasize good hand washing and other hygienic practices after they have recovered from norovirus illness.

### **What treatment is available for people with norovirus infection?**

Currently, there is no antiviral medication that works against norovirus and there is no vaccine to prevent the infection. Norovirus infection cannot be treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics work to fight bacteria, not viruses. The best treatment for those infected with noroviruses is supportive care. Plenty of liquids should be given to keep the person hydrated and lots of rest is recommended.

### **Can norovirus infections be prevented?**

Yes. Prevention includes:

- Frequently washing hands, especially after toilet visits and changing diapers and before eating or preparing foods.
- Carefully washing fruits and vegetables and steaming oysters before eating them.
- Thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Immediately removing and washing clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness.

Persons who are infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for three days after they recover from their illness. Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of properly.

Information adapted from the CDC *Norovirus Q & A* sheet